

'The Boy who loved Bubbles'

By Romi Grossberg

Bou must be only three years old at the most. Him and his older brother have been coming for almost a year already, and although our Centre's minimum age is four years, no one around here would have the heart to ask Bou or Tou to leave. He has become somewhat of our mascot and is adored by staff and students alike. He is without a doubt the dirtiest child I have ever seen. At first it was kind of 'cute' if I can say that, a dirty little brown, barefoot child running around.

He and I had grown close over time and he would often climb on to my lap whilst I was working on my laptop and annoyingly press all of the keys until I would give up on work and let him play. He had a face you just couldn't say no to.

I noticed once whilst catching him asleep at my desk that he seemed to be in the middle of some kind of nightmare. I watched him for a while and felt disturbed and helpless watching such a small child look so afraid and unsettled. Normally when I think of children sleeping, they appear to me as angelic and almost smiling in their sleep, and I feel very peaceful. Watching Bou I felt incredibly anxious and uneasy and it raised alarm bells in the counselor in me, as to what his home life was like.

He was always dirty, his clothes were even filthier if that was possible, he never had shoes on, often had new bumps and cuts and was always too tired for a boy his age. He had a big belly but not the cute, tubby, he eats too much kind, the malnourished kind you often see on television advertisements trying to raise money for starving children in Africa. Bou had unusually big eyes for an Asian child and a big, round moon face that looked like the face of a 90 year old man.

One morning I was standing outside class when it was finishing. Bou came running out. It was as if he was rebellious by nature and learning and discipline were just not for him. He just wanted to get back to the dance floor where he could jump, spin and play. He sees me and without thinking runs and jumps up. Luckily, I am usually ready to be launched on by a number of the younger children, Bou in particular. I catch him, give a big cuddle and swing him around in a loop.

'The Boy who loved Bubbles'

By Romi Grossberg

All of a sudden I feel sick, I mean really sick like I could vomit without warning. For once it was not the expected food poisoning that can come on as sudden as that, it was a smell. A smell so horrid that it could churn your stomach. A smell that was stale and still, as if it had gone straight up my nose and in to my mouth so I couldn't take a breath. I felt like I couldn't escape. I realised it was coming from Bou and went in to a mixed state of shock that a human could smell so bad, and that his family had not noticed and allowed him out this way.

My eyes spotted Tin and Sery, the volunteer sisters that help with the little ones when they are not teaching. I motioned to the girls and explained that I wanted him washed. Without batting an eyelid, Tin took him out of my arms and Sery went to find soap.

In a country like Cambodia stripping a child of his clothes in a somewhat public area is a completely normal sight, in fact many children are not dressed to start off with, and so I had to throw all western ideals of washing a child in front of others, out the window. Once upon a time even in the western world that would have been ok, but these days with everyone so paranoid, it seems little children are only safe in their own homes with their parents. Here however, life was public, every aspect of life whether showering, eating, getting dressed or defecating could be a public affair and no one would blink twice.

Tin and Sery take off his shorts and t-shirt. His shorts are like cardboard and practically stand up alone in their own filth. I don't know whether to be amused or not as they hose him down like they are washing their motorbike. You can see in his face that he is not sure how to feel either. He is standing still for them but he doesn't know what to make of this apparently new experience. We start playing and distracting him from what appears to be an uncomfortable moment. Immediately he relaxes and starts playing with the hose too, pouring it on himself whilst giggling, as if showing off.

Sery gets the soap out and the two of them lather him head to toe in soapsuds. I am talking lathering him head to toe in a way I am not sure anyone has witnessed before. I am more watching what the girls are doing than Bou, and when I finally stop to really see him, I burst in to laughter.

The sweetest little brown boy with eyes as big as an owl is now covered in white bubbles and all you can see are his eyes and what is left of his few broken and

'The Boy who loved Bubbles'

By Romi Grossberg

rotten teeth. He is smiling and giggling and wanting to help the girls make more bubbles on his malnourished body. I think he had never felt so special.

Eventually he is dried off and put in to new clothes. The shorts I'd found were even bigger than I thought and KK went to find a piece of string to use as a belt to hold them up. Of course my boss then changed his t-shirt for another also. Silly me, I just wanted him clothed but KK tells me that if I am going to dress him I could at least dress him 'cool'. Of course.

With KK at the head now and dressing Bou, his eyes widen even more. Bou adores KK even more than soapy bubbles, and receiving his love, attention and dress style is more than the little one can bare with his smile so big it may just crack his face.

That night, in my small one bedroom apartment, I decide to hand wash Bou's clothes. One, because I thought it would be faster and two, because if I were to be honest I did not want that filth in a wash load with my own clothes. They are so little that I can fit them in my small sink. I rinse them first just in water and then fill my sink with detergent and start swirling. I push and pull and rub but it doesn't seem to be working. I do this for so long my arms are getting tired. As a joke I stand the shorts up in my sink and laugh, wanting to cry, as they actually do stand up. What should I do?

I ring my mum in Melbourne and give her the scenario. I don't know if she knows what to make of my story of Bou and his clothes that are far beyond filthy. Her first reaction is "so, throw them out" but these are not mine to throw and I dare say the family will not be buying more. So she tells me to boil water and soak the shorts in this and then do it again with detergent and rinse. This is going to be a long night.

Fortunately or unfortunately this washing of Bou becomes a bit of a ritual around the Centre. It was at a point where some days Bou and Tou would walk up to me, take off their clothes, and with big pleading eyes, point at the hose. The volunteer sisters would see this, giggle and just turn it on. Some days, other children would go and line up too and we would have what looked like one big standing up bath of naked brown children.

'The Boy who loved Bubbles'

By Romi Grossberg

"Can you take him? Look after him? Please help us." Bou's parent's had come to see KK and this is what they had asked. After telling me this, KK looked at me with pleading eyes, the same pleading eyes that Bou now has when he wants to be washed. KK is also a very hard man to say no to. Most people can't but I know that right here, right now I need to be strong. Ready to be angry with Bou's parents for giving up on their child, I ask about the conversation they had. KK tells me that they came to him very humble and embarrassed. They explained that as hard as they tried they couldn't find enough work and money to look after the two children they had. Bou was difficult and they didn't have the time or the skill to know how to be good parents to him. They wanted something more for him than what they could offer. They trusted us.

I stood up, paced the room, sat back down, stood up and did it all over again. I truly didn't know what to say. There was no doubt we all adored Bou to death but this was not enough. I had great respect for his parents talking so openly with KK. Mostly I was scared. Generally in the slums here, the parent's just make do, or sell their child. Them acknowledging all of this took a lot of courage and also meant, that they truly couldn't afford to keep him.

KK and I sat to discuss this in detail. Even though deep down we were somewhat on the same page, we argued back and forth, which was normally how we would get to the bottom of problems we struggled to answer. KK wanted The Centre to take Bou in and I argued that we do not have the facilities to be looking after a four year old. He knows this is true but he argues back anyway. It gets a little heated and eventually he snaps, "You are so selfish" he yells at me.

It hurts, he knows it hurts. He is frustrated and trying to make a point. I am frustrated too and trying to hold my own when all I want to do is take Bou home and give him a good life.

After much debate KK concedes defeat but I can see this conversation is far from over. He stares at me for a long time, words on the tip of his tongue but not coming out. I panic. Eventually he comes out with it. "You take him?" he mumbles in a tone like he has just offered me a cup of coffee in the hope I won't notice the gravity of his request. I know he is serious. He tells me that he knows I love Bou and Bou loves me, that I am great with children and I could offer him a life far beyond anyone's dreams.

'The Boy who loved Bubbles'

By Romi Grossberg

I must admit I do stop and think about it. Could I? Could I really do this? He does love me, I do love him, is this possible? My rational head then kicks back in and I know this is not a good idea. I spend the next thirty minutes explaining to KK why this will not work. I am flattered he thinks I could do this but remind him I have never been a mother and whilst yes I adore Bou, I wouldn't know the first thing about bringing up a child, especially one from a different culture, with a different language and in a different country.

Back and forth we go again until we both slump in to our chairs exhausted as if having just gone ten rounds in a ring. We have no answer.